

The Unique Experiences of an Inspector

BY ARTHUR STRINGER

I.---THE STOLEN CODE

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"Thank You, I Prefer to Stand," Was Her Answer.

It was long after midnight. That much I knew. For it must have been an hour and more since I had watched the twelve ruby flashes from the topmost peak of the Metropolitan tower signal an unheeding world that another of its gaze had gone.

I knew, even as I wandered drowsily out of my Gracery square house door and paced as drowsily round and round the iron-fenced park enclosure, that I was about to face another sleepless night. I swung myself wearily down on a bench in Madison Square, facing the slowly spurting fountain that had so often seemed to me a sort of visible pulse of the sleeping city. Then I peered at the sleepers all about me, the happy sleepers huddled and sprawled along the park benches. I envied them, every mortal of that ragged and homeless army; I almost hated them. For they were drinking deep of the one thing I had been denied.

Then, as I gazed idly northward, I suddenly caught sight of a figure turning quietly into the quietness of the square. It attracted and held my eye because it seemed the only movement in that place of utter stillness, where even the verdigris-tinted tree leaves hung as motionless as though they had been cut from rusty plates of copper.

I watched the figure as it drew nearer and nearer. The lonely midnight seemed to convert the casual stroller into an emissary of mystery, into something compelling and momentous.

I watched the stranger as closely as a traveler in midocean watches the approach of a lonely steamer. I did not move as he stood for a moment beside the fountain. I gave no sign of life as he looked slowly about, hesitated, and then crossed over to the end of the very bench on which I sat. There was something military-like about the slim young figure in its untidy and inconspicuous cape overcoat. There was also something alert and guardedly observant in the man's movements as he settled himself back in the bench. He sat there listening to the purr and splash of the water. Then, in an incredibly short space of time, he was fast asleep.

I still sat beside him. I was still idly pondering who and what the newcomer could be, when another movement attracted my attention. It was the almost silent approach of a second and larger figure, the figure of a wide-shouldered man in navy-blue serge, passing quietly in between the double line of bench sleepers. He circled once about the granite-bowed ring of the fountain almost. Then he dropped diffidently into the seat next to the man in the cape overcoat, not five feet from where I sat.

Something about him, from the moment he took up that position, challenged my attention. I watched him from under my hat brim as he looked guardedly about.

Then I saw a hand creep out from his side. There was something quick and reptilian in its movements. I saw it feel and pad about the sleeping man's breast. Then I saw it slip, snake-like, in under the cloth of the coat.

It moved about there, for a second or two, as though busily exploring the recesses of every possible pocket.

Then I saw the stealthy hand quietly but quickly withdrawn. As it came away it brought with it a packet that flashed white in the lamplight, plainly a packet of papers. This was thrust hurriedly down into the coat pocket of the newcomer next to me. There was not a sound. There was no movement.

The wide-shouldered man sat there for what must have been a full minute of time. Then he rose quietly to his feet and started as quickly away.

It wasn't until then that the full reality of what he had done came home to me. He had deliberately robbed a sleeping and unprotected man.

In three quick steps I had crossed to the sleeping man's side and was shaking him. I still kept my eyes on the slowly retreating figure of the thief as he slowly and apparently diffident way up through the square.

"Quick! Wake up!" I cried, with a desperate shake at the sleeper's shoulder. "You've been robbed!"

The next move of that little midnight drama was an unexpected and startling one. Instead of being confronted by the dispirited maunderings of a half-wakened sleeper, I was suddenly and firmly caught by the arm and jerked bodily into the seat beside him.

"You've been robbed?" I repeated, as I felt that firm grip haul me seaward.

"Shut up!" said a calm and very wide-awake voice, quite close to my ear.

"But you've been robbed!" I expostulated.

"How do you know that?" he demanded.

"Why, I saw it with my own eyes! And there goes the man who did it!" I told him, pointing northward.

He jerked down my hand and swung around on me.

"Watch that man!" he said almost fiercely. "But for heaven's sake keep still!"

"What does this mean?" I naturally demanded.

He swept me with one quick glance. Yet he looked more at my clothes, I fancy, than at my face. My tailor seemed to be quite satisfactory to him.

"Who are you?" he asked. I took my time in answering, for I was beginning to resent his repeated note of superiority.

"My name, if that's what you mean, happens to be the unassuming but highly respectable one of Kerfoot-Witter Kerfoot."

"No, no," he said with quick impatience. "What are you?"

His eyes were still keenly watching the slowly departing figure. My stippancy seemed to have been lost on him. His muscular young hand suddenly tightened on my sleeve.

"By God, sir, you can help me!" he cried, under his breath. "You must! I've a right to call on you, as a decent citizen, as—"

"Who are you?" I interrupted, quite myself by this time.

"I'm Lieut. Palmer," he absently admitted all the while eyeing the moving figure.

"And—?" I prompted as I watched his gaze follow that figure.

"And I've got to get that man, or it'll cost me a court-martial. I've got to get him. Wait! Sit back here without moving. Now watch what he does!"

I saw the thief drop into an empty bench, glance down at his timepiece, look carefully about, and then lean back with his legs crossed. Nothing more happened.

"Well," I inquired, "what's the game?"

"It's no game," he retorted, in his quick and decisive tones. "It's mighty near a tragedy. But now I've found him! I've placed him! And that's the man I'm after!"

"I don't doubt it," I languidly admitted. "But am I to assume that this little bench scene was a sort of, well, a sort of carefully-studied-out trap?"

"It was the only way I could clinch the thing," he admitted.

"Clinch what?" I asked, conscious of his hesitation.

"Oh, you've got to know," he finally conceded, "now you've seen this much! And I know you're the right sort. I can't tell you everything. But I'm off the Connecticut. She's the flagship of our Atlantic fleet's first division, the flagship of Rear Admiral Shroder. I was sent to confer with Admiral Maddox, the commandant of the Navy Yard. It was in connection with the navy's new Emergency Wheel Code. I can't explain it to you; there's a lot of navy department data I can't go into. But I was ashore here in New York with a list of the new wireless code signals."

"And you let them get away?"

"There was no letting about it. They were stolen from me, stolen in some mysterious way I can't understand. I've only one clue. I'd dined at the Plaza. Then I'd gone up to the ballroom and sat through the amateur theatricals for the French Hospital. I'd been carrying the code forms, and they'd been worrying me. So I 'spit the wheel' as they say in the service. I mean, I divided them and left one half locked up at my hotel while I still carried the other half. Each part, I knew, would be useless without the other. How or when they got the half I was carrying I can't tell, for the life of me. I remember dancing two or three times in the ballroom after the theatricals. But it couldn't have been any of those women. They weren't that sort."

"Then who was it?" For the first time a sense of his boyishness had crept over me.

"That's just it: I don't know. But I kept feeling that I was being shadowed. I was almost positive I was being trailed. They would be after the second half, I felt. So I made a dummy, and loafed about all day waiting for a sign. I kept it up until tonight. Then, when I actually found I was being followed, every move I made, I—"

His voice trailed off and he caught at my arm again.

"See, he's on the move again! He's going, this time. And that's the man! I want you to help me watch him, watch every step and trick. And if there's a second man, I'm going to get you to follow him, while I stick to this one. It's not altogether for myself, remember; it's more for the whole service!"

We were on our feet by this time, passing northward along the asphalted walks that wound in and out between the trees.

"You mean this man's a sort of agent, a foreign spy, after your naval secrets?" I asked, as we watched the figure in blue circle casually out toward Fifth avenue.

"That's what I've got to find out. And I'm going to do it, if I have to follow him to hades and back!" was the young officer's answer. Then he suddenly drew up, with a whispered warning.

"You'd better go west, toward Broadway. Then walk north into Fifth avenue again, toward Brentano's corner. I'll swing up Madison avenue on the opposite side of him, and walk west on Twenty-sixth street. Don't speak to me as we pass. But watch him, every moment. And if there's a second man, follow him!"

A moment later I was sauntering westward toward the Hoffman House corner. As I approached the avenue curb I saw the unperturbed figure in blue stop beside the Farragut monument on the northwest fringe of Madison Square. I saw him take out a cigar, slowly and deliberately strike a match on the stone-work of the pedestal, and then as slowly and deliberately light his cigar.

I felt, as I saw it, that it was some sort of signal. This suspicion grew stronger when, a moment later, I saw a woman step out of the avenue doorway of Marshall's. She wore a plumed Gainsborough hat and a cream-colored gown. Over her slender young shoulders, I further made out, hung an opera cloak of delicate lacework.

She stood for a moment at the carriage stop, as though awaiting a cab or taxi. Then she quickly crossed the avenue and, turning north, passed the waiting man in blue. She passed him without a spoken word.

But as the cream-colored figure drifted nonchalantly by the broad-shouldered man I caught a fleeting glimpse of something passing between them, a hint of one hand catching a white packet from

another. It was a hint, and nothing more. But it was enough.

My first impulse, as I saw that movement, was to circle quickly about and warn Palmer of what had taken place. A moment's thought, however, showed me the danger of this. And the young lieutenant, I could see, had already changed his course, so that his path southward through the center of the square paralleled that of the other man now walking more briskly along the avenue curb.

He had clearly stated that I was to watch any confederate. I had no intention to quibble over side issues. As I started northward, indeed, after that mysterious figure in the Gainsborough hat and the cream-colored gown, a most pleasant and purposeful tingle of excitement thrilled up and down my backbone.

I shadowed her as guardedly as I was able, following her block by block as she hurried up the empty thoroughfare that was now as quiet and lonely as a glacial moraine. She may have suspected me by this time, I felt, for twice I saw her look back over her shoulder.

Then I suddenly stopped and ducked into a doorway. For a moment after I saw a wandering hansom come clattering into the avenue out of Thirty-third street. I discovered that, at her repeated gesture, it was pulling up beside the curb.

I stood well back in the shadow until she had climbed into the seat, the apron had slammed shut, and the driver had wheeled his vehicle about and started northward again. Then I skirted along the shop fronts, darted across the street, and made straight for the hotel cabstand and a taxi driver drowsily exhaling cigarette smoke up toward the tepid midnight skies.

"Up the avenue," I said, as I clambered in. "And follow that hansom two blocks behind until it turns, and then run up on it and wait."

It turned at Forty-second street and went eastward to Lexington avenue. Then, doubling on its tracks, it swung southward again. We let it cluster on well ahead of us. But as it turned suddenly westward, at the corner of Twenty-third street, we broke the speed laws and drew once more up on it. Then, as we crossed Twenty-third street, I told the driver to keep on southward toward Gramercy Square. For I had caught

sight of the hansom already drawn up at the curb, halfway between Lexington and Fourth avenues.

A moment after we joined across the car tracks I slipped away from the taxi and ran back to the cross street on foot. As I reached the corner I caught sight of a figure in a cream-colored gown cross the sidewalk and step quickly into the doorway of a shabby four-story building.

I had no time to study this building. My one important discovery was that the door opened as I turned the knob and that I was able quickly and quickly to step into the dark hallway.

I stood there in the gloom, listening intently. I could hear the light and hurried click of shoe heels on the bare-tread boards of the stairs. I knew, as I did so, that the woman had climbed to the top floor.

Then I heard the chink of metal, the sound of a key thrust into a lock, and then the cautious closing of a door. I stood there in deep thought for a minute or two. Then I groped my way cautiously to the foot of the stairs, found the heavy, old-fashioned balustrade, and slowly and silently climbed the stairway.

I did not stop until I found myself on the top floor of that quiet and many-colored building. I stood there, at a standstill, peering through the darkness that surrounded me.

My search was rewarded by the discovery of one thin streak of yellow light along what must have been the bottom of a closed door. Just beyond that door, I felt, my pursuit was to come to an end.

The door, I found, was locked. But inside the room I could still hear the occasional click of shoe heels and the indeterminate noises of an occupant moving quietly yet hurriedly about.

I stood there, puzzled, depressed by my first feeling of frustration. Then I made out the vague oblong of what must have been a window in the rear of the narrow hall. I tiptoed back to this window, in the hope that it might lead to something. I found, to my disappointment, that it was barred with half-inch iron rods. And this meant a second defeat.

As I tested these rods I came on one that was not so secure as the others. One quiet and steady wrench brought an end screw boldly out of the half-rotted wood. Another patient twist or two entirely freed the other end.

I found myself armed with a four-foot

bar, sharpened wedge-like at each end for its screw head. So I made my way silently back to the pencil of yellow light and the locked door above it. I stood there listening for a minute or two. All I could hear was the running of tap water and the occasional rustling of a paper. So I quietly forced the edge of my rod in between the door and its jamb, and as quietly levered the end outward.

Something had to give under that strain. I was woefully afraid it would be the lock itself. This I knew would be a snap, and promptly betray my movement. But as I increased the pressure, I could see that it was the socket screws that were slowly yielding in the pine wood jamb.

I stopped and waited for some obliterating noise before venturing the last thrust that would send the bolt free of the loosening socket. It came with the sudden sound of steps and the turning off of the running tap. The door had been forced open and stood an inch or two from the jamb before the steps sounded again.

The thing was repugnant to me, but it was necessary. As I plucked her there, writhing and panting, I deliberately thrust my right hand into the open bosom of her gown. It was the key itself that redeemed the assault and brought a gasp of relief to my lips, the huge brass key, as big as an egg beater.

"Loochee!" I heard gasped into my ear. "You know you can still call the police. I told her as I faced the heavy black door of the safe. One turn of the wrist, however, would bring me face to face with my prize."

A sudden movement from the woman, as I stooped over the safe door, brought me round in a flash. She was on her feet and halfway across the room before I could intercept her.

That earlier assault at my hands seemed to have intimidated her. I could see a certain terror in her eyes as I forced her back against the wall. She must have realized her helplessness. She stared up into my face, bewildered, desperate.

"Wait!" she cried, catching at my arm. "If there is anything good I want I will give it to you."

"There are several things I want," was my uncompromising answer.

"But why should you want them?" she asked, still clinging to my arm.

"It's my duty to take them," I replied, unconscious of any mendacity. "That's what I'm sent here for. That's why I've watched the man who gave you the packet."

"What packet?"

"The packet you took in Madison Square an hour ago; the packet you locked in this safe."

"What are you going to do?" she asked as she watched me shove a chair over against the wall, directly beside the safe.

"I'm going to seat you very comfortably in this comfortable chair," I informed her, "and in this equally comfortable corner directly behind the safe door. And at the first trick or sign of trouble, I'm afraid I'm going to make a hole right through one of those nice, white shoulders of yours!"

She had thrown her hat and cape aside, and was at the moment bending

low over the dark maw of the opened safe, reaching into its recesses with one white and rounded arm. I made no sound; of that I was certain. Yet some sixth sense must have warned her of my presence. For without rhyme or reason she suddenly stood erect, and swinging about in her tracks, confronted me.

Her face, which had been a little flushed from stooping, went white. She stared at me without speaking, her eyes wide with terrified wonder.

I stared at her with a singularly disengaged mind. I felt, in fact, very much at my ease, very much the master of the situation.

Her next move, however, threw a new complexion on the situation. For she unexpectedly let her hand dart out to the wall beside her, just behind the safe top. As she did so, I could hear the snap of a switch button; the next moment the lights went out. It left the room in impenetrable darkness.

As I stood peering unavailingly through the gloom I could hear the quick thud of the safe door being shut. Then came the distinct sound of a heavy key being thrust and turned in a metal lock—the safe, obviously, was of the old-fashioned key-tumbler make—and then the noise of the key being withdrawn. Then came a click or two of shoe heels, a rustle of clothing, and a moment later the startlingly sharp shattering of a window pane.

The woman had deliberately locked the safe and during the key through the window! She had stolen a march on me.

"Be so good as to turn on that light!" I commanded.

Not a sound came from the darkness. "Turn up that light," I cried, "or I'll fire! I'll rake every foot of this room!"

And with that I gave a very significant double click to my cigarette-case, crying: "The light comes on again, as suddenly as it went out. I discreetly pocketed my cigarette case."

The woman was standing beside the safe, as before, studying me with her wide and challenging eyes. But all this time not a word had come from her lips.

"Sit down!" I commanded, as authoritatively and yet as offensively as I could. It was then that she spoke for the first time.

"Thank you, I prefer to stand!" was her answer. She spoke calmly and distinctly and almost without accent. Yet I felt the voice was, in some way, a foreign one.

"You will be here for some time," I hinted.

"And you?" she asked. I noticed an almost imperceptible shrug of her softly rounded shoulder.

"I'll be here until that safe is opened," was my retort.

"Ah, then I shall sit down," she murmured, as she caught up the lace cape and adjusted it about her shoulders. "For, believe me, that will be a very, very long time, monsieur!"

I watched her carefully as she crossed the room and sank into a chair. She drew her cream-colored train across her knees with frugal and studious deliberateness.

It suddenly flashed over me, as I watched her, that her ruse might have been a double-barreled one. It was not the key to the safe she had flung through the window! She would never have been so foolish. She still had that key somewhere about her.

"And now what must I do?" she asked, as she drew the cloak closer about her shoulders.

"You can hand me over the key to that safe," was my answer.

She could actually afford to laugh a little.

"That is quite impossible!"

"I want that key!" I insisted.

"Pardon, but is this not dangerous?" she mildly inquired. "Is it not so to break into houses at midnight, and rob women?"

It was my turn to laugh.

"Not a bit of it," I calmly assured her. "And you can judge if I'm frightened or not. There's something much more dangerous than that!"

She was again studying me with her puzzled and ever-narrowing eyes.

"Well, for example, the theft of governmental naval codes, among other things."

"You are very, very drunk," she retorted, with her quietly scoffing smile. "You are insane, quite insane. May I not lock my jewels in my own safe? Ah, I begin to see this is a trick, that you may steal from me!"

"Then why not send for the police?" I challenged, pointing toward the telephone.

A look of guile crept into her studious eyes.

"You will permit that?" she asked.

"I wait for it," I replied.

"Then I shall call for help."

"Only from the police."

"Yes, I shall call for help," she repeated, crossing to the telephone.

I leaned forward as she stood in front of it. I caught her bare arm in my left hand, just below the elbow. As I drew it backward I brought her body against mine, pinning her other arm down close against my chest.

The thing was repugnant to me, but it was necessary. As I plucked her there, writhing and panting, I deliberately thrust my right hand into the open bosom of her gown. It was the key itself that redeemed the assault and brought a gasp of relief to my lips, the huge brass key, as big as an egg beater.

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"What packet?"

"The packet you took in Madison Square an hour ago; the packet you locked in this safe."

She sat down, without being forced into the chair. I knew, as I thrust the bare key in the safe lock and turned it back, that she would have to be watched, and watched every moment of the time.

I had already counted on the safe door, as it swung back, making a barrier across the corner in which she sat. This I found to be the case. I took a second precaution, however, by shoving a tilted chair back firmly in under the edge of the safe lock.

I knew, as I stooped before the open strong box, that she could make no sudden move without my being conscious of it. I also knew that time was precious. So I reached into the depths of the almost empty safe and lifted out a number of papers neatly held together by a rubber band.

These I placed on the safe top. Then I snatched off the band and examined the first document. On the back of it, nearly inscribed in French, was the eminently satisfactory legend: "Plans signed: Specifications: Four Submarines: Bn. Lake Torpedo Company, Bridgeport." The next packet was a blueprint of war projectiles, and on the back of it was written: "Model T. Tracings, through Jensen, from the Bliss & Co. Works—Self-Projectors."

The third packet carried no inscription. But as I opened it I saw at a glance what it was. I knew at a moment that I held before me the governmental wheel code of wireless signals in active service. It was the code that had been stolen from Lieut. Palmer. The fourth and last paper I found, was plainly the dummy which had been taken from the same officer that night in Madison Square.

"What I want to know," I said, as I handed the four papers together, and thrust them down in my pocket, "is just how you got that first code from my young friend the Lieutenant?"

She smiled again, a little wearily, as I swung the safe door shut and locked it. She did not rise from the chair. But as I stood confronting her, something in my attitude, apparently, struck her as distinctly humorous. For she broke into a sudden and deeper ripple of laughter.

There was, however, something icy and chilling in it. Her eyes now seemed more veiled. They had lost their earlier look of terror, but they seemed to have relaxed into softer contours.

"Would you like to know," she said, lifting her face and looking with that older, half-mocking glance into my own. "Would he be so out of place in a ballroom? Ah, have not more than hearts been lost when a man dances with a woman?"

"I see—you mean you stole it, at the Plaza?"

"Not at all, monsieur," she murmured languidly back.

Something about her face, at that moment, puzzled me. It seemed to hold some latent note of confidence.

Then I understood. I saw through it all, in one tingling second. For there, facing me, stood the figure of a man in navy blue. It was the same figure that I had followed through the square.

But now there was nothing servative or circuitous about his attitude. It was quite the other way; for as he stood there, he held a blue-barreled revolver in his hand. And I could see, only too plainly, that it was leveled directly at me.

The man took three or four steps farther into the room. His revolver was still covering me. I heard a little gasp from the woman as she rose to her feet.

"You are going to kill him!" she cried, in German.

"Havens! I got to!" asked back the man. He spoke in English and without an accent. "Don't you understand he's a safe-breaker? He's broken into this house! So! He's caught in the act—shot in self-defense!"

I watched the gun barrel. The man's calm words seemed to horrify the woman at my side.

"Wait!" she cried.

"Why?" asked the man, with the gun. "He has everything—the code, the plans, everything!"

"Get them!" commanded the man.

"But he's armed," she explained.

A new crossing of the other's impassive face. "What if he is? Take his gun; take everything!"

The woman stepped close to where I stood. Her movements were more than ever panic-stricken, as she went through my pockets one by one. Yet her flashing and dexterous hands found